

**Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies
Ecumenical and Interreligious Working Group
Oxford, England, United Kingdom
August 4-11, 2024**

The Dangers of Religious Nationalism

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In 2021, the Governing Board of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA (NCC) adopted a policy statement on “The Dangers of Christian Nationalism in the United States.”² I served on the Theology Task Force that wrote the draft policy, which began as a subgroup of the NCC’s Convening Table for Interreligious Dialogue and Collaboration (Interreligious Dialogue). I have participated in the Convening Table for more than ten years on behalf of the Wesleyan Theological Society. My background in Wesleyanism and Methodism has been invaluable for my work on behalf of interreligious relations. It has also been invaluable for my work on behalf of the NCC’s Convening Table on Theological Dialogue and Matters of Faith and Order (Faith and Order), which I have served on for more than twenty years.

Now the Theology Task Force is working on a related issue—the dangers of religious nationalism worldwide. Of course, it was far easier to write a policy statement about the dangers of Christian nationalism, since the NCC members of the Dialogues are Christian. We wrote “The Dangers of Christian Nationalism in the United States” within the context of being Christians in the United States. The dangers of religious nationalism are not limited to the United States, however. Nor are they limited to traditions of Christianity; dangerous manifestations of nationalism occur in Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Islam. So, the Theology Task

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² “The Dangers of Christian Nationalism in the United States: A Policy Statement of the National Council of Churches,” adopted April 20, 2021, National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, website, accessed September 4, 2023, <https://nationalcouncilofchurches.us/common-witness-ncc/the-dangers-of-christian-nationalism-in-the-united-states-a-policy-statement-of-the-national-council-of-churches/>.

Force is exploring what can or should be said about the dangers of religious nationalism worldwide.

Although the prospect of cautioning other religions is a complicated task, Christians ought to warn others about the dangers of religious nationalism because of unjust and violent lessons we are learning about religious nationalism among Christians. I will begin by talking about the dangers of Christian nationalism, viewing it in the context of the United States as well as outside the country. Then I will talk about the challenges of warning other religious traditions about nationalistic tendencies in their present-day contexts, since their religions as well as their socio-political contexts differ so much from Christians in the U.S. In doing so, I include insights from Wesley and the Methodist tradition for navigating the complexities of communicating effectively with people in other religious traditions. Finally, I will make recommendations for challenging the destructive effects of religious nationalist occurrences that arise around the world.

The Dangers of Christian Nationalism

Britannica defines Christian nationalism as an “ideology that seeks to create or maintain a legal fusion of Christian religion with a nation’s character. Advocates of Christian nationalism consider their view of Christianity to be an integral part of their country’s identity and want the government to promote—or even enforce—the religion’s position within it.”³ I begin with a standardized definition of Christian nationalism, since Christians differ in their valuation of it. Some Christians oppose it, while other Christians welcome it. I consider Christian nationalism to be a fault-ridden interpretation of biblical Christianity, and as a result, it endangers people in the United States, religiously and socio-politically.

Let me elaborate about Christian nationalism by referring to the policy statement adopted by the NCC, entitled “The Dangers of Christian Nationalism in the United States.” The policy statement says that Christian nationalists typically promote the following religious affirmations:

³ “Christian nationalism,” *Britannica*, website, access June 27, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Christian-nationalism>.

- that the United States was founded as a Christian nation;
- that America is exceptional. That is, God has given the United States particular blessings and privileges not available to people in other countries, and the nation must remain Christian in order for those blessings to continue;
- that only Christians are the proper custodians of this nation's heritage;
- that Christianity (or a particular form of Christianity) should have privileged status in the United States, particularly in matters of law and political policy;
- that, even when their presence is tolerated, people who practice other religions or none cannot be fully American—they are not welcomed, their voices are discounted, and they are not to be trusted with political and cultural leadership;
- that Christians in general and some Christians in particular should enjoy a level of legal protection not granted to those who practice other religions; and,
- that Christians have been made to suffer unjustly, leaving them no alternative but to respond with revolutionary zeal to preserve the United States as a great Christian nation.⁴

I can give numerous examples of Christian nationalism in the United States, and they vary in terms of their affirmation of the aforementioned characteristics.⁵ Overall Christian nationalists are growing in their numbers and influence in the U.S., sometimes claiming a Seven Mountain Mandate, asserting dominion over family, religion, education, media, arts and entertainment, business, and government.⁶

⁴ "The Dangers of Christian Nationalism in the United States."

⁵ For example, see books published in support of Christian nationalism: Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Nationalism in the United States*, updated ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022); Stephen Wolfe, *The Case for Christian Nationalism* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2022); and Eric Metaxas, *Letter to the American Church* (Washington, DC: Salem Books 2022).

⁶ For example, see books published in support of the Seven Mountain Mandate: Johnny Enlow, *The Seven Mountain Mantle: Receiving the Joseph Anointing to Reform Nations* (Lake Mary, FL: Creation House, 2009); Robert Henderson, *Impacting the Seven Mountains from the Courts of Heaven: Kingdom Strategies for Revival in the Church and the Reformation of Culture* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image Publishers, 2023); and Deborah McClen- don, *Mandate to Invade the 7 Mountains of God: A Candid Look at Christianity's Influence on the 7 Spheres of Cul- ture* (Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace, 2018).

Christian nationalism has become increasingly contentious in the United States, largely because of conservative, evangelically oriented Christians who claim that the past (and possible future) President Donald Trump is chosen by God to (re-)Christianize the country.⁷ The claim is ironic, to put it mildly, since Trump was one the least Christian presidents in U.S. history. The attempt to Christianize the country reflects longstanding dominion theology, also known as dominionism.⁸ Such dominionism echoes earlier claims to Israelism—Anglo-Israelism, British Israelism, and American Israelism.

The Christian nationalist movement in the United States is largely made up of people who are white, reflecting the long entanglement of nationalism and racism that is our collective inheritance since the earliest days of America's colonial settlement. This racist aspect of Christian nationalism exacerbates its danger for the U.S. It contributes to the marginalization, oppression, and persecution of people due to their racial and ethnic identity.⁹ Christian nationalism also enables other bigotries against people due to their sex, sexual orientation, class, language, and nationality.

The solution to Christian nationalism is not to withdraw from the public square. The NCC policy statement says:

The alternative to Christian nationalism, however, is not disengagement from politics, but a willingness to work in the public realm and to cross over political, social, economic, and religious boundaries in order to discern and

⁷ See Michael C. Bender, "The Church of Trump: How He's Infusing Christianity into His Movement," *The New York Times*, website, posted April 1, 2024, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/christian-donald-trump-religion-media-b2517035.html>; Alexandra Ulmer, "'God Gave Us Trump': Christian Media Evangelicals Preach a Messianic Message," *The Independent*, website, posted March 22, 2024, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/christian-donald-trump-religion-media-b2517035.html>; and William Cummings, "'God's Used Imperfect People through History': Perry Shares Why He Thinks Trump Is the 'Chosen One'," *USA Today*, website, posted November 25, 2019, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2019/11/25/rick-perry-trump-gods-chosen-one/4295185002/>.

⁸ "Dominion theology, also known as dominionism, is a group of Christian political ideologies that seek to institute a nation governed by Christians and based on their understandings of biblical law"; see Wikipedia, website, accessed June 27, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dominion_theology. In addition, "Prominent adherents of those ideologies include Calvinist Christian reconstructionism, Charismatic and Pentecostal Kingdom Now theology, and the New Apostolic Reformation."

⁹ See Michael Fisher, Jr. (General Editor), Whitney Wilkinson, and Don Thorsen, eds. *Confronting Racism and White Supremacy in the US: Twenty-First Century Theological Perspectives*. Washington, DC: Friendship Press, 2024.

foster the common good for all people in this nation and the world. Christians are called both to support the government of the United States insofar as it serves this beneficent goal and to work diligently for reforms wherever and whenever it does not. We are called to give thanks for the gifts God has channeled to us through this nation and to confess our complicity in this nation's moral failings.¹⁰

The solution is not ignoring the problems but wisely and courageously engaging them. Christians have much to contribute to the well-being of a country. It needs to contribute to the common good, though, and not to the detriment of anyone who is different from the majority, especially those who are the neediest in society.

The NCC policy statement concludes with implications for dangerous manifestations of nationalism in other religions. It says:

As we challenge Christian nationalism in the U.S., we also recognize the influence of various forms of religious nationalism in some other countries. We stand ready to join with our colleagues in other religious communities and other settings to explore the impact of such religious nationalisms on societal resilience, religious minorities, domestic well-being, and international peace.¹¹

For this reason, the Theology Task Force is currently working on a policy statement that warns about the dangers of nationalism that Christians have experienced in the United States. The warnings extend to Christian churches around the world as well as to other religions.

Christian Churches Worldwide

Given the dangers of Christian nationalism, what can or should be said to others outside the context of the United States about the dangers of conflating

¹⁰ "The Dangers of Christian Nationalism in the United States."

¹¹ "The Dangers of Christian Nationalism in the United States."

nationalism with their religion? What can or should be said to Christians in other countries? What can or should be said to other religious traditions, which are different religiously as well as nationally?

Throughout history, Christians have had differing views about the relationship between churches and government. Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches have had varying relationships with the countries and governments in which they lived. The relationships were often close and mutually beneficial. I do not want to minimize the good outcomes that occurred because of their contributions to the common good. Today more than a dozen countries still designate Christianity as their state religion or have state churches.¹² Thus, there is not unanimity with regard to the benefits and liabilities of officially intertwined church-state relations by Christians around the world.

Although wonderful outcomes can occur due to official church-state relationships, dangerous outcomes can also occur. One contemporary example exists in the Russian Orthodox Church and its relationship with the country of Russia and President Vladimir Putin. Russia invaded Ukraine, and Patriarch Kirill sanctioned the military action, lauding it as a “holy war” against forces of evil.¹³ Other Orthodox Churches, however, have condemned Kirill’s remarks. For example, Bartholomew I is the Archbishop of Constantinople and Ecumenical Patriarch, and he rejected the complicity of Russian Orthodox Christianity with the unjust treatment of Ukraine.¹⁴

¹² “Today, several nations officially identify themselves as Christian states or have state churches. These countries include Argentina, Armenia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Denmark (incl. Greenland and the Faroes), England, Georgia, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Malta, Monaco, Norway, Samoa, Serbia, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vatican City, and Zambia. A Christian state stands in contrast to a secular state, an atheist state, or another religious state, such as a Jewish state, or an Islamic state”; see “Christian State,” Wikipedia, website, accessed July 3, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_state.

¹³ For example, see Riley Bailey, Christina Harward, Angelica Evans, and George Barros, “The Russian Orthodox Church Declares ‘Holy War’ Against Ukraine and Articulates Tenets of Russia’s Emerging Official Nationalist Ideology,” Institute for the Study of War, website, March 30, 2024, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-orthodox-church-declares-%E2%80%9Choly-war%E2%80%9D-against-ukraine-and-articulates-tenets>; and Cynthia McCormick Hibbert, “What Does It Mean that the Russian Orthodox Church Is Calling Putin’s Invasion of Ukraine as a ‘Holy War’?” Northeastern Global News, website, April 3, 2024, <https://news.northeastern.edu/2024/04/03/russian-orthodox-church-ukraine-holy-war/>.

¹⁴ For example, see Neil MacFarquhar and Sophia Kishkovsky, “Ukraine War Divides Orthodox Faithful,” New York Times, website, April 18, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/18/world/europe/ukraine-war-russian-orthodox-church.html>; and Brendan Cole, “Ukraine Is Now ‘Holy War’, Russian Church Declares,” *Diplomat Magazine*, website, April 3, 2024, <https://diplomatmagazine.eu/2024/04/03/ukraine-is-now-holy-war-russian-church-declares/>.

Other dangerous examples of Christian nationalism can be found around the world. In Brazil, President Jair Bolsonaro utilized a coalition of Catholic and evangelical Christians who promoted violence for achieving Bolsonaro's socio-political goals. However, Christian groups around the world denounced his presidency as abuses of Christian nationalism.¹⁵ To these examples, I could add others.

Christians ought not to avoid participation in the public square, since they have much to contribute to the well-being of society. They have contributed much throughout church history, and they continue to do so today. However, when an exclusivist amalgamation of Christianity and politics arises that disestablishes other Christians, religions, and people of no religion, then abuses arise that are unjust. They marginalize the neediest people in society, and Christian nationalists exploit others in maintaining their dominant moral and cultural order, as they alone claim to understand it.

Dialoguing with Other Religions

The concern to write about religious nationalism by the Theology Task Force arose, in part, because of the various interreligious dialogues sponsored by the NCC. The first time that religious nationalism arose as an issue occurred in the Hindu-Christian Dialogue in the 2010s, when questions arose about reports of the unjust treatment of Christians in India. Since Narendra Modi was elected Prime Minister, members of NCC-related churches in India have reported growing mistreatment, largely due to the Hindutva emphasis on the cultural, national, and religious identity of true Hindus.¹⁶

¹⁵ For example, see Raimundo Barreto and João B. Chaves, "Christian Nationalism Is Thriving in Bolsonaro's Brazil," *The Christian Century*, website, December 1, 2021, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/christian-nationalism-thriving-bolsonaro-s-brazil>; and Brian Kaylor and Beau Underwood, "Christian Nationalism Invades Brazil," *Word & Way*, website, January 10, 2023, <https://wordandway.org/2023/01/10/christian-nationalism-invades-brazil/>.

¹⁶ The following sources talk about the challenges of religious nationalism in India: Krutika Pathi and Sheikh Saaliq, "Once a Fringe Indian Ideology, Hindu Nationalism Is Now Mainstream, Thanks to Modi's Decade in Power," *Associated Press*, website, April 18, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/india-election-narendra-modi-hindu-nationalism-rss-79c30c8ae750a9c037d86b9e2c1b640c>; and Rhea Mogul, "Modi's 'Divine India' Vision Threatens to Marginalize Millions," *CNN*, website, February 4, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/05/india/india-modi-ram-temple-analysis-intl-hnk/index.html>.

In the Jewish-Christian Dialogue, the state (or country) of Israel has always been a point of concern. Although dialogues have mostly had to do with Jewish and Christian relations in the United States, the U.S.'s relationship with Israel repeatedly came up in discussion. The treatment of Jews in the U.S. was not considered to be unconnected with how Americans treated Israel. Of course, since the October 7 attacks on Israel in 2023 by Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups, the Jewish and Christian dialogue has become more complex, more tense. Religious nationalistic manifestations have influenced both the Israeli and Palestinian sides of the conflict, which makes dialogue—much less collaboration—more difficult.

I could give other examples of perceived religious nationalism in other parts of the world: Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka,¹⁷ and Islamic nationalism in various countries.¹⁸ These examples have not recently been problematic in the NCC dialogues with Buddhists and Muslims. However, after the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001, Muslim-Christian dialogue became strained, and tension continues to exist in the bilateral dialogues due to religious nationalist tendencies, both among Christians and Muslims.

The topic of religious nationalism is especially difficult in talking with Muslims, since Islam has been closely connected with governments and national identities throughout its history. Different types of religious nationalism have existed in Muslim contexts, including Turkish, Arab, Iranian, and Kurdish nationalism. Despite longstanding connections between Islam and national identities, not all

¹⁷ For example, see Shashik Silva and Ammaarah Nilafdeen, "The Future of Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism," *Groundviews*, website, November 7, 2023, <https://groundviews.org/2023/11/07/the-future-of-sinhala-buddhist-nationalism/>; and Isha Gupta, "Buddhist Nationalism and Burgeoning Alignments: Sri Lanka's Transitional Justice Dilemma," *Stimson*, website, November 12, 2021, <https://www.stimson.org/2021/buddhist-nationalism-and-burgeoning-alignments-sri-lankas-transitional-justice-dilemma/>.

¹⁸ For example, see Brian Catlos, "Religious Nationalism Finds a Footing in the Middle East," *The Washington Post*, website, January 2, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/religious-nationalism-finds-a-footing-in-the-middle-east/2015/01/02/b1fca096-91f2-11e4-a900-9960214d4cd7_story.html; and Madawi Al-Rasheed, "Wahhabi Religious Nationalism Turns Ugly," *Politico*, website, November 27, 2015, <https://www.politico.eu/article/wahhabi-religious-nationalism-turns-ugly-mecca/>; and Nicholas Danforth, "On the Anniversary of Istanbul's Conquest, the Turkish President's Fusion of the Secular and the Divine May Be His Most Potent Legacy," *New Lines Magazine*, website, May 28, 2023, <https://newlinesmag.com/essays/a-fetih-accomplish-how-erdogan-married-religion-and-nationalism/>; cf. Joel Carmichael, "Islam and Arab Nationalism: The Role of Religion in Middle Eastern Politics," *Commentary*, website, July 1957, accessed July 3, 2024, <https://www.commentary.org/articles/joel-carmichael-2/islam-and-arab-nationalism-the-role-of-religion-in-middle-eastern-politics/>.

Muslims consider religious nationalism to be beneficial, politically as well as religiously.

It goes beyond the scope of this paper to talk about all of the possible manifestations of religious nationalism worldwide. Suffice it to say that the reality of religious nationalism is a growing concern around the world. Governments are as concerned about this emergence of religious nationalism as are members of religion.¹⁹ The concern does not merely have to do with Christian manifestations of religious nationalism. It also has to do with manifestations of religious nationalism in Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Islam.

To Whom Do We Speak?

When the Theology Task Force of the NCC initially became concerned about the emergence of religious nationalism in countries around the world, our primary concern had to do with the bilateral Christian dialogues with Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, and Muslims in the United States. They are the ones with whom we have the most contact. Should our comments be directed to these American representatives of other religious traditions, or should our comments be broader?

Since the goal of our theological work was to produce a policy statement for the NCC, our most immediate audience would be members of churches in the NCC. However, like the policy statement on the “Dangers of Christian Nationalism in the United States,” we want our wording to be meaningful to other potential readers, including those inside and outside the U.S.

Whenever people representative of one religion talks with people from other religions, there occurs the need to be careful listeners as well as speakers. The need for carefulness becomes greater when speaking with people outside the United States. There have always been challenges with regard to being empathetic and constructive dialogue partners, since the U.S. has hurt so many countries due to political and military as well as religious relations for centuries. Foreign relations are precarious in general; relations with Americans have multiple

¹⁹ The Council on Foreign Relations, for example, held a worship that discussed the political ramifications of religious nationalism. See “Religious Nationalism Around the World,” Council on Foreign Relations, website, May 19, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/event/religious-nationalism-around-world>.

layers of distrust. Will our stated concerns be welcome, or will they sound ethically disingenuous, culturally insensitive, or will they be considered another example of American triumphalism?

Everyone in the Theology Task Force has tried to approach the topic of religious nationalism with openness to learning, without making recommendations too quickly. We have tried to emphasize the need for further dialogue, yet at the same time we want to share concerns that have been detrimental to religious and political matters in the United States.

It may look presumptuous to speak for anyone other than for one's own selves, in one's own place and time. Yet, as Christians, it is incumbent upon us to reach out to our neighbors—to try to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Our reach may seem to overextend, from time to time. Humility does not mean timidity, though, and so we try to find constructive ways to relate with our neighbors who may be able to avoid some of the nationalistic pitfalls that we are experiencing religiously and politically in the United States.

A Wesleyan Perspective

As part of the Wesleyan tradition of Christianity, I think that our beliefs, values, and practices are relevant beyond our church tribe, even beyond our Christian tribe. John Wesley lived long before interreligious dialogue and collaboration became a priority among Methodists and their church offshoots. Yet, there are theological principles he advocated that have inspired me as well as others in ecumenical and interreligious work.

For example, Methodist scholars often emphasize Wesley's "practical divinity." His practical divinity was less concerned about ideological (or theological) purity and more concerned about demonstrating purity by tangibly loving one's neighbor(s) as oneself. In ecumenical terms, we can talk about practical divinity with regard to Wesley's "catholic spirit." His sermon on the "Catholic Spirit" emphasized the desire and need for cooperating in ministry with like-hearted Christians, even if there remained unresolved differences of opinion about theological

matters.²⁰ In terms of interreligious dialogue and collaboration, we can talk about practical divinity with regard to how Christians may collaborate with adherents of other religions when they tangibly serve the neediest people, alleviating that which impoverishes them or unjustly violates them.

Wesley was willing to set aside differences in theological ideas, when holy actions prevailed. He emphasized goodness over ideological purity, and holy tempers over ideas. In his sermon “On Living Without God,” Wesley said:

I believe the merciful God regards the lives and tempers of men more than their ideas. I believe he respects the goodness of the heart rather than the clearness of the head; and that if the heart of a man be filled (by the grace of God, and the power of the Holy Spirit) with the humble, gentle, patient love of God and man, God will not cast him into everlasting fire...because his ideas are not clear, or because his conceptions are confused. Without holiness, I own, “no man shall see the Lord”; but I dare not add, “or clear ideas.”²¹

Wesley believed in Jesus Christ as his savior and lord, but that did not prevent him from working with those who shared practical good will and advocacy on behalf of those in need. Indeed, Wesley actively sought to minister to the neediest in society—to those impoverished physically as well as spiritually, and socially as well as individually.

Douglas Meeks talks about Wesley’s practical divinity as a manifestation of his emphasis on the so-called “greatest commandment” of loving God and of loving one’s neighbor as oneself. Especially with regard to preventing unnecessary violence toward others, Meeks says:

²⁰ John Wesley, “Catholic Spirit,” sermon 39, *The Works of John Wesley* (Bicentennial ed.), vol. 2, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985). For example, Wesley says: “But although a difference in opinions or modes of worship may prevent an entire external union, yet need it prevent our union in affection? Though we can’t think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences. These remaining as they are, they may forward one another in love and in good works” (§4, p. 82).

²¹ John Wesley, “On Living Without God,” §15, sermon 130, *The Works of John Wesley* (Bicentennial ed.), vol. 4., ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 175.

Practical Divinity would eschew the formal attempt to find what is universally true in each religion, an activity that takes place mostly in academic settings at some distance from the violence prone distortions of religion or from the marvelous expressions of peace in localities.²²

Considering Meeks' understanding of Wesley's practical divinity, I argue that we as Christians ought to seek collaboration with adherents of other religions in order to ameliorate the suffering of people due to the injustices of religious nationalism. Meeks continues:

So Practical Divinity suggests beginning life at the table with other religions by focusing on situations that threaten human beings and the earth and asking what the peculiar narrations of God of each religion contribute to the common work to alleviate suffering.²³

Wesley's practical divinity does not sully the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ by dialoguing with representatives of other religions and collaborating with them when it comes to warning the world about the dangers of religious nationalism.

Wesley did not address the dangers of religious nationalism. Only recently have Christians become acutely aware of its menace to people around the world. Nevertheless, he was aware of the destruction and death produced by the fanatical zeal of all religions in the world, and not just Christianity. Wesley said:

There are few subjects in the whole compass of religion, that are of greater importance than this. For without zeal it is impossible, either to make any considerable progress in religion ourselves, or to do any considerable service to our neighbor, whether in temporal or spiritual things. And yet nothing has done more disservice to religion, or more mischief to mankind, than

²² M. Douglas Meeks, "Wesleyan Contributions to Life with Other Religions," Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies, 2013, 6, accessed July 7, 2024, <https://oxford-institute.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/2013-3-meeks.pdf>.

²³ Meeks, 7.

a sort of zeal which has for several ages prevailed, both in Pagan, Mahometan, and Christian nations. In so much that it may truly be said, pride, covetousness, ambition, revenge, have in all parts of the world slain their thousands; but zeal its ten thousands.²⁴

Wesley did not consider fanatical religious zeal only attributable to other religions; Christians were equally guilty of the deaths of thousands of people due to corrupted social, political, and militaristic values. Thus, if Christians suffered from the dangers of religious nationalism, then other religions ought to be warned of the dangers as well.

Recommendations

In trying to warn others about the dangers of religious nationalism, what—again—can or should be said? The Theology Task Force plans to begin cautiously, offering recommendations rather than specious solutions. The recommendations have more to do with promoting dialogue and collaboration worldwide than with addressing particular problems in particular places.

Let me make likeminded recommendations for people concerned about the dangers of religious nationalism. In making them, I draw on insights learned from my work with the Theology Task Force.²⁵ It is my hope that the recommendations spur others to talk more about the dangers of religious nationalism and then to support one another in confronting them.

Acknowledging the problem: Religions in the world have varying views about the relationship between their religions and the respective nations in which they live. However, when religious zealotry and state power combine, dangerous results occur that impact people, especially those who are marginalized and oppressed. Acknowledging that problems occur represents a necessary starting

²⁴ John Wesley, “On Zeal,” §1, sermon 92, *The Works of John Wesley* (Bicentennial ed.), vol. 3, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 308-309.

²⁵ “Religious Nationalism Policy Statement” (draft), Theology Task Force, Dialogue for Interreligious Dialogue and Collaboration, National Council of Churches, paper (online), June 12, 2024. The Theological Task Force continues to work on the draft for submission to the Governing Board of the National Council of Churches.

point for discussing the reality of religious nationalism and the transgressions it commits against others who do not readily fit into either their religion or nation.

Cultural discernment: Both religions and government situations are so different that great discernment is needed in understanding the cultural context of each particular state of affairs. After all, religions make positive contributions to the well-being of society. However, when injustices occur due to the complicity of religions and governments, then those injustices need to be called out. Discernment is needed in sorting out the diversity of particular cultural contexts. Such diversity includes the presence of varied religions as well as other variations having to do with race, ethnicity, economic systems, political systems, class, language, and more. Thus, cultural discernment related to the dangers of religious nationalism can help to identify and address the genuine harms that exist.

Common good: Religions of the world have a sense of the common good, spiritually as well as physically, for example, as manifested in variations of the so-called golden rule: doing to others as you would have them do to you. We need to draw on that value in advocating against religious and governmental practices that target disadvantaged neighbors, robbing them of their dignity as well as their ability to survive. Religions of the world do not intend to exploit and do violence toward others, and so the concept of the common good needs to predominate over competing concepts of privilege for dominant religious and political parties.

Helpful resources: There exist helpful resources that can be used in confronting the dangers of religious nationalism. For example, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was established by the United Nations in 1948. It articulated the basic rights and fundamental freedoms of all human beings. The UDHR committed nations to recognize all humans as being "born free and equal in dignity and rights,"²⁶ regardless of "nationality, place of residence, sex, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, language, or any other status."²⁷ Because the UDHR was not written from a particular religious perspective, it can provide a common guide for resisting dangerous manifestations of religious nationalism around the world.

²⁶ Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), Article 1, United Nations, 2015, https://www.un.org/en/udhrbook/pdf/udhr_booklet_en_web.pdf.

²⁷ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 2.

Religious leaders: Realistically, challenges to religious nationalism will not occur until the leadership in both religious and political bodies agree that there are dangers to be avoided. Leaders will need to exert courage in order to resist injustice. Courage is needed to convince others that changes are needed, and then to work constructively for those changes. We need to support leaders who must use their voices for the sake of equality and human dignity, rather than for perpetuating damage done to their religion as well as to society as a whole.

Final Thoughts

Based on the damage that I have witnessed due to Christian nationalism in the United States, it is important to me to warn others about the dangers of religious nationalism. This warning extends to other countries and not just the U.S. I do so knowing how difficult it is to speak convincingly to people of other religious traditions in other countries. To say and do nothing, however, implies consent to unnecessary suffering and pain.

Some critics see the rise of religious nationalism worldwide as a turning point in geopolitics. If religious nationalism spreads, the future seems dire. Nina Khrushcheva says:

Leaders who claim to have divine missions are leaders who seek to increase their power and extend their rule, ideally indefinitely. Vladimir Putin has already achieved that goal, and Narendra Modi and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan have been headed in the same direction, but Donald Trump might represent the apotheosis of religious populism.²⁸

I agree, which is why I consider it imperative to warn others about the dangers of religious nationalism.

The United States as a country as well as American Christians have acted unjustly, oppressively, and violently toward other religions and countries in the

²⁸ Nina L. Khrushcheva, "The Demigods of Populism," Project Syndicate, website, July 1, 2024, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/putin-trump-modi-erdogan-use-religion-to-boost-their-personal-power-by-nina-l-khrushcheva-2024-06>.

past. I know that anything I and other Christians in the U.S. say may be received with incredulity, repugnance, or anger. Yet, speaking out of my experience, I think it is as important to warn people about the dangers of Christian nationalism in the U.S. as it is to warn others about religious nationalism throughout the world. I do this out of a deep sense of respect for other religions, not accepting that they want their religions to become co-opted by political, economic, and other socio-cultural factors that corrupt their religions as well as their countries.

For similar reasons, the Theology Task Force will continue to write a warning about religious nationalism, which hopefully will become a policy statement adopted by the National Council of Churches. We do our work with humility as well as courage, hoping that more conversation and collaboration will occur with our interfaith partners, both in the U.S. and abroad. Since we share the world, we want to work together toward a more humane world.

My Questions:

1. How do we deal with dialogue over Hindu Nationalism, Buddhist Nationalism, Jewish Nationalism, Islamic Nationalism when *nationalism* is understood to be essential to preservation of de-colonialism, while discussion of persecution of religious minorities is regarded as a colonialist move to discredit the state.
2. “Cannot be too conservative.” Why this move? What is conservatism trying to conserve? What is its model of the role of Christian communities in the larger society?
3. How do we identify the common good? No religion or nation is willing to sacrifice itself for the common good.
4. Problem of a religion in denial of movements that are nationalist and/or caste because these don’t meet their own self-image. What is the *real* religion?
5. Christian nationalism? Or the use of religion as a political tool, that in turn irrevocably damages the religion.